

Michigan Small Farm Success Stories

Barbara James Norman, Blueberry Farmer

Barbara James Norman is the proud owner of a 53-acre blueberry farm in the small southwestern Michigan town of Covert. She's lived here all of her life, working in the fields as a child. The farm belonged to her grandfather, and he passed it on to Barbara. It's taking some doing, but with determination, persistence, and patience Barbara is returning this land to its original splendor.

Covert is prime blueberry country. With sandy soils and a high water table the blueberry bushes thrive. The area has many blueberry farms; one of the largest and most profitable owned and operated by "Doc" Anderson. "Doc" has taken Barbara under his wing, passing along his know-how gained through years of experience. Barbara listened to Doc and sought assistance to optimize and protect the base of her farm, the natural resources. Barbara heard about USDA programs and headed to her local USDA Service Center to find out more. She was an early participant in many of the educational and outreach programs that were geared to the under served members of her community. She discovered the Natural Resources Conservation Service, developed a conservation plan and was on her way.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service was able to assist Barbara with installing a number of conservation practices on her farm. Using the Environmental Quality Incentives Program she built an agrichemical containment facility. This area is especially vulnerable to chemical leaching given the sandy soils and high water table.

Erosion reduction measures, including this critical area seeding and grade stabilization structure prevent soil from entering the surface drain. Barbara's farm is within a few miles of Lake Michigan; nutrients and chemicals do not have far to travel before entering the great lake. Fisheries and recreation may be impacted if tributaries to the lake are not protected from sedimentation.

Cover crops are another component of Barbara's conservation plan; perennial rye is planted between the rows. This practice keeps the soil in place between the blueberry bushes and filters chemicals and fertilizers.

Barbara is not only a pupil of the experienced farmers in her community; she is a teacher as well. Her enthusiasm is infectious; she wants her neighbors and friends to experience



the benefits of farming as she does. A woman of action, Barbara was instrumental in establishing and serves as president of the Southern Michigan Farmers Cooperative. One of the Co-op's most recent activities involved holding an open air market for parents receiving WIC (Women, Infant and Children) coupons. Together Co-op members harvested the fruits and vegetables, transported the produce 300 miles to Detroit, and sold the produce in an open air market during a coupon distribution day. The successful event was sponsored by the Detroit Food Security Commission.

Barbara was a bus driver for the Covert schools and knows most of the kids in her community on a first-name basis. Teachers in the Covert School District ask Barbara to talk to their students about farming, careers related to farming. The students go out to her farm so they can see first hand what it takes to be a farmer. She brings together resource people to speak to kids about their career experiences. Barbara also does this for adults in her community. She has hosted two farm days in the past two years, bringing resource people together to meet with farmers and those interested in farming.



Education and information will help the farmers in Barbara's community get ahead. Since she began working with USDA Barbara has learned a lot and wants to share her knowledge with others. Currently, Barbara is working with the Michigan Integrated Food and Farming Systems, a non-profit organization implementing an USDA Outreach and Technical Assistance Grant for Socially Disadvantaged and/or Minority Farmers.

Barbara James Norman, a blueberry farmer from Covert, Michigan is an inspiration to small farmers everywhere. She not only farms; she farms with a stewardship ethic. She has established herself as a community leader, mentor and role model through her caring compassion and love of her fellow human beings. She shares all she has learned openly and willingly.

John and Inez Parks

John and Inez Parks are beginning farmers who are active participants in many of the USDA educational and outreach programs that have become available in their area within the last few years.

They have owned land in southwest Michigan for about 11 years, but have just begun their farming operation in 2002. They currently own about 208 acres, with 91 acres comprising their main farm. John did farm work while he was growing up, and his dream is to grow and propagate blueberries. Both John and Inez are now retired from jobs in Chicago where he was a utility company employee and she worked as a bank loan officer. Mr. Parks' mother is also involved with the farming operation as are the Parks' son, John Paul Jr. and two grandchildren. The Parks are definitely developing their farm for future generations.

The Parks are participating in a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant mentoring program. They are learning from their mentor, Doc Anderson and from the program's mentor coordinator, Barbara Norman. Barbara provided the Parks with a range of publications and helped them learn about USDA programs that could benefit them. Doc loaned them equipment to help them prepare their land to plant blueberries. He took John to buy his initial blueberry plants and supervised him as he planted ten acres. Doc brought John to his greenhouse and taught him to cut blueberry whips, divide them into pegs, and plant them in peat moss. When John purchased materials to construct his own greenhouse, Doc supervised that construction and showed John how to put on the plastic. Doc even provided some blueberry whips to help the Parks start propagating blueberries. John now has 4000 blueberry plants growing in his greenhouse, which has room for 50,000 plants. After one year in the greenhouse, the plants can go outside in the ground, into a nursery plot. After one year there, they can be planted in their permanent location. Then it's three more years until the plants are in production.



John and Inez Park have taken advantage of every learning opportunity presented them. They have participated in virtually all of the programs sponsored by the Michigan Integrated Food and Farming Systems, a non-profit organization that has received grants from USDA Outreach and Assistance to Socially Disadvantaged Farmers and Ranchers programs, Risk Management Education Grants, as well as, the SARE mentoring grant. Through these outreach and



educational grant programs, the Parks were part of a group that visited Growing Power, Inc. in Milwaukee in October 2002; they have attended three Michigan agriculture conferences; they visited the Benton Harbor market; they participated in a cost of blueberry propagation workshop; they attended a Select Michigan program; they took garden produce to a Project FRESH marketing day in Detroit; they participated in Integrated Pest Management training, and they participated in a 2003 Tilling the Soil of Opportunity entrepreneurial training, during which they completed a business plan.

The Parks have completed a conservation plan for their farm, which has a stream running through it. This helped them qualify for Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP) funding to assist with pest management, nutritional management, wildlife, and heavy usage access. They plan to install irrigation and anticipate receiving EQIP assistance for that.

Next year they plan to plant ten more acres and to fill their greenhouse with blueberry pegs. They will also experiment by planting some whips outside, rather than in the greenhouse, a technique being used by some growers.

Mitch Bramley

Mitch Bramley learned about farming while he was growing up in Mississippi. He carries on the hard work that is a part of his heritage, busy on his farm from sun up to sun down. As an adult he worked for the railroad and is now retired. He owned over 200 acres in southwest Michigan at one time, and now farms 125 acres, growing corn, soybeans, 26 beef cattle and some pigs. He sells the grains to the local elevator. Mr. Bramley is participating in a Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) grant mentoring program. He is learning from his mentor, Roger Outlaw and from the program's mentor coordinator, Barbara Norman. Mr. Bramley chose to participate in the mentoring program to better understand USDA programs.

Mr. Bramley prefers to stay on his farm rather than attend educational programs, so his mentor, Roger, attends programs and brings information back to share with Mr. Bramley. Barbara Norman also visits Mr. Bramley monthly to review and discuss the information. She also took him to visit the local USDA offices.

Mr. Bramley now has a conservation plan for his farm and has received Environmental Quality Incentive Program (EQIP) funding for nutrient management, pesticide management, and wildlife. Mr. Bramley is also applying to receive assistance for a comprehensive nutrient management plan (CNMP) and for assistance to build fencing.

His mentor, Mr. Outlaw, has assisted Mr. Bramley in straightening out his records for commodity payments.

Mr. Bramley participated in two risk management field days near Covert and worked through some NRCS economic training at his kitchen table. Next year he plans to complete his manure management facilities, increase his beef herd, and eliminate pigs.